



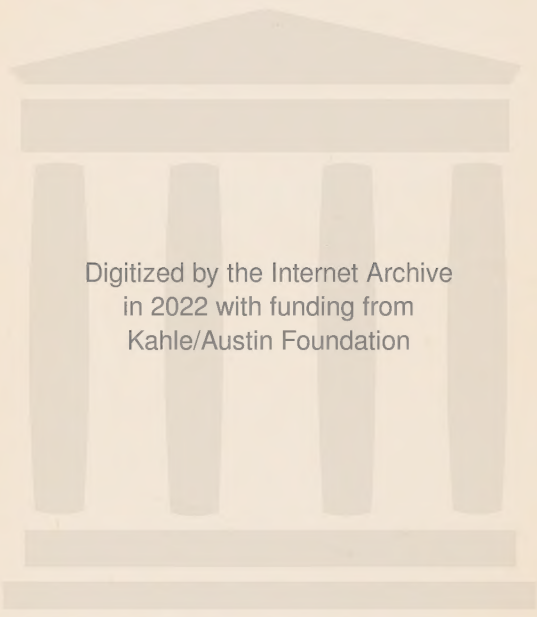
Margaret Carnegie  
Library







THE MAN WHO  
CONQUERED DEATH



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2022 with funding from  
Kahle/Austin Foundation

# THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

V.  
BY FRANZ WERFEL



---

NEW YORK · SIMON & SCHUSTER

1927

Mills College Library  
Withdrawn

Copyright, 1927, by Simon and Schuster, Inc.  
37 West 57th Street, New York



MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES  
OF AMERICA



W488 m

51051

*Translated by*

CLIFTON P. FADIMAN

*and*

WILLIAM A. DRAKE



THE MAN WHO  
CONQUERED DEATH



## INTRODUCTION

If, in the writings of Franz Werfel, there is any single quality which stands forth as the chief abettor of the genius which we may now unhesitatingly ascribe to him, that quality is pity. By this, we do not mean merely the counterfeit coin of the term, that all too familiar mingling of condescension and complacency, which degrades what it is required to elevate and offends more often than it balms. The true pity is a more upright, more impulsive, finer sentiment, which tolerates no smug levels of Me and Thee. It is the moment of sublimity which comes into being when one person, in the shock of a tragic instant, abandons his own security in commiseration for the peril of another; the

## INTRODUCTION

whole-spirited response to a generous conception of life, which recognises the common identity of all living creatures in the embrace of Nature, and which mingles the momentary fate of every human being in the scheme of an eternal and universal destiny.

Such is the pity of a god for the imperfect creatures of his fashioning; such, the pity of a father for his children; such, the pity of every great creative artist for the tragic puppets of his show: Euripides for *Electra* and *Iphigenia*, Æschylus for *Prometheus*, Sophocles for *Œdipus*, Shakespeare for *Lear*, Goethe for *Faust*, and Cervantes for the lugubrious hidalgo of *La Mancha*. It is a sentiment for which no perfection of formal art can do service, which no prodigality of genius can quite supply, and which is, by its own virtues, capable of producing masterpieces. And precisely this sentiment has been predominant in Franz Werfel's work since the

## INTRODUCTION

publication of his first volume of poems, *Der Weltfreund*, inaugurated the most consistently messianic career in contemporary letters. In all the ramifications of the religio-moral mysticism through which the main current of his art has since passed, this has remained the most substantial and significant characteristic of his spiritual attitude. The poems in *Wir Sind*, *Der Gerichtstag*, and *Bechwörungen* are almost entirely given over to its expression, and his plays are a great outcry against the remediable flaws and the hidden secrets which, persisting in the nature of man, keep him from achieving the high perfection and the ethical integrity of which his spirit and his life are capable.

Werfel is a stern exorciser of these physical and spiritual shortcomings, and an ardent partisan of humanity. By the sublime paradox of his genius, he knows the foulness of the world too well to have anything but hope for life. He is honest

## INTRODUCTION

alike with his eyes and with his spirit. If the picture of life which he presents is sometimes sordid, gruesome, and disquieting, it is so because it is the image of a social order, laid open to an innermost core which discloses the taints and morbid contractions of decay. Yet, it is the singular quality of Werfel's art that he can pardon every offense and fill even bleak sordidness with light. It is not his part to be the impassive historian of his epoch, to limn terrible pictures with the cold precision of the Naturalists, to re-create a blank misery which congeals in the apathy of utter despair. He is the most stern, the most exacting, the most honest watcher of the modern world. But he can afford to be stern and exacting and honest, for he knows that human life contains no ill which the immemorial spirit of man cannot transcend; and being confident of this, there can be no bitterness, no desolation in his vision.



## INTRODUCTION

For, seeing the worst, not alone in the outward gesture which is man's daily existence, but in the secret spirit which is his veritable life, Franz Werfel has found the holy substance of hope. In the darkness of man's deepest depravity, he has found the promise of perfection. Beneath the most unlovely husk of living being, he has discovered an essence which remains, through every transmutation, within itself of spotless purity, although so overlaid by the muck of circumstance that only the eyes of love can penetrate to the beauty which it keeps hidden even to itself. Werfel believes in life, for he has seen, beyond all the sordidness that is and that has been, the rising dawn of a new day that may yet come to be. He has faith in his fellow-creatures, because he loves them—because he loves them as himself. As himself! For, in Werfel's creed of life, the humblest and the greatest of those fellow-creatures are veritably himself: their life

## INTRODUCTION

is his life, and they are capable of the very emotions which agitate his breast, and he of theirs. For the whole of life appears to Franz Werfel as an infinitely involved, transcendental entity, and every creature that partakes of the gift of life as a portion of some vast, cosmic life-force which, in perpetual variations, re-creates itself within the spirit of every living being and irrevocably binds that being to every other in which the miracle has been consummated.

So Werfel is filled with pity for all the unfortunate of life, his brothers, his other selves. "Nothing but infinite pity is sufficient for the infinite pathos of human life," says the ingenious author of *John Inglesant*; and that is the quality of pity which Werfel feels for such miserable creatures as those who drag out the sterile, paltry, meaningless pattern of their existence in the few pages of *The Man Who Conquered Death*. There is here,

## INTRODUCTION

not the melancholy majesty of extinguished genius, as in the same author's *Verdi*; nor the morbid passions of those who come too close, as in *Nicht der Mörder, der Ermordete ist Schuldig*. There is here only the monotonous *chad gadya* of pitiful lives, the dispirited shufflings of the least of the galley-slaves of the world across a screen of drab and meagre poverty. Yet even amid these desolate surroundings, the indomitable spirit of humanity flames out in the last, heroic, superhuman effort by which Fiala, the negligible "Spiesser," the intimidated "Siemandl," achieves, at one stroke, magnanimity, significance, and a place in Valhalla.

In the unfolding of his tale and in the delineation of its characters, Werfel has touched a note of poignancy which few writers achieve. Technically, he perhaps succeeds in doing so because the singularity of his literary gift makes it possi-

## INTRODUCTION

ble for him to arrange narrative prose so as to give the climactic emphasis of drama, while extracting from it the internal effectiveness of poetry. But above all, he is able to do so because, in a peculiar sense, he writes of Fiala as he would write of the man who, save for the grace of God, he might himself have been; the man who, by the conviction of his personal mysticism, he veritably is. And by the virtue of this attitude, the fate of the broken ex-doorkeeper of the National Treasury Office takes on a deep and intimate significance in his eyes. He pities him, and pities him with an attentive and anguished sort of compassion which one, in the brusque haste of life, feels only for those who are the closest to oneself. And this sentiment, of which Franz Werfel feels sufficient in his heart to offer to every living creature, is the element which, more than any other, illumines and elevates the young Austrian's

## INTRODUCTION

art and fills it with a compelling moral greatness; and it is, when all is done, the only true pity—that sentiment which is, in Chaucer's song:

“Humblest of herte, hiest of reverence,  
Benigne flour, coroune of vertues alle.”

WILLIAM A. DRAKE

New York, 2 August 1927.



## I

THE flat consists of a living room, a kitchen, and a small bedroom on the fourth floor of a house in the Josefstädterstrasse, near the avenue that circles the ward. Herr Fiala and his wife sleep in the bedroom; Klara, Frau Fiala's sister, makes use of a mattress in the kitchen, where there certainly is not room for another bed, and Franzl has to sleep on the oilcloth-covered sofa in the living room. This room does not open on the street, but on a large courtyard. It is true that the courtyard doesn't afford a great deal of light, but the more indulgent lodgers are wont to assert that an acacia tree flourishes in its legendary depths, and that, while the rooms are dark, to be sure, they are all the more quiet for that. Besides, on this sharp winter day, the

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

sun has essayed a tentative advance, and a few quivering flecks of light are thrown on the wall at the moment when Herr Fiala enters.

The tenant surveys his quarters, not without complacency. There are plenty of others more badly off—many, too, in the streets! And people who had once stood much higher in the scale than he—officials and majors! How can one begin to comprehend the shiftings of these last few years? Hold fast and be quiet, that's all one can do. And a man, at sixty-four, is fortunate to be still holding his job. Of course, it's only half-time, but then, the firm is laying off men every day. God is merciful, and the pay of a warehouse watchman is too meagre to be stricken from the books. Everything going nicely. At sixty-four and sixty-two, people don't eat much, anyway. Klara, the jade, gets her meals at the houses where she works, and that leaves Franzl as the only really unlucky one.



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Herr Fiala's train of ideas, identical day in and day out, has come to a full stop. Now he commences the habitual routine of his homecoming. First of all, he goes over to the pipe-stand. He runs his hand across the porcelain bowls. Never in his life has he smoked a pipe or used tobacco in any form. The stand is the gift of a former employer, who had thought by this means to rid his house of disagreeable smoke and dirt. Herr Fiala takes a certain pleasure in fingering the smooth glaze of the pipe-bowls. It feels expensive, comfortable. Your hand strokes the pipes—and you seem to be reaching out after long-forgotten times, better days . . .

The old man turns from the stand and crosses to the table before the window. It resembles a sewing table, whose usefulness has been impaired by all manner of daring architectural elaborations. At the corners are four monsters, like sea-horses or gothic gargoyles. There is no work-box on the

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

table; instead, there is a large desk-blotter, and next to that, a hand-blotter. Herr Fiala rests his hand on the hand-blotter for a moment, as if this object of refinement communicates to him some gentle and comforting sentiment of well-being. He does not glance at the two arm-chairs at either side of the table, for he is now standing proudly in front of his sideboard. *This* had not been sold when the other furniture had gone. (Formerly, the Fialas had had four furnished rooms, two of which they had let.) The sideboard—now, there is something to look at! It stands there like a fortress, with its columns, its knobs, its pillars. It was left from the luxurious confectioner's shop in Kralowitz, where his wife had formerly lived. A man who can claim such a sideboard as this as his own, is not wholly lost. If he had sold it, the proceeds from the sale might have been increased by two million Kronen. But who, for that, would give up his manhood?

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Not that the sale of his old house hadn't brought in a tidy sum of money, thank God; but one cannot be too sure of money nowadays! He wasn't so stupid as his foolish wife imagined, to go and put it in the savings bank. He had already watched his two savings accounts dwindle to nothing. If the last fortune should be lost, what would the future be; what would become of his wife, what of Franzl? For Marie, the poorhouse at Lainz; for the boy, the Steinhof Asylum! And Herr Fiala knows only too well what that would mean. Aren't the old people always whispering about the horrors of charitable institutions? Life must be terrible there, so terrible that the inmates throw themselves from the windows, just to make an end of it! "The hearses go by, day and night, day and night." Even supposing that it's only silly gossip, the poorhouse is and remains a disgrace. And he will not put this disgrace upon his parents, who had always been re-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

spectable people, and who were once of considerable standing. He has never been a beggar. He has always had enough to eat. His family shall not end their days at Lainz!

And so Fiala, passing his gnarled hands over the sideboard, has finally arrived at his precious secret. Herr Schlesinger has shown him the way out; Herr Schlesinger, the insurance agent for the Tutelia Company, a former countryman, and for years his neighbour. Fiala's mood of self-satisfaction is the result of this secret which he shares with Schlesinger. Nevertheless, there is some anxiety mingled with his complacency. His brain is dull and weary, while Schlesinger is used to talking well and rapidly. Besides, do you think it's an easy thing to keep secrets from women? Schlesinger was right! Don't let them pry anything out of you! The worst thing about women is their continual suspicion . . .

Herr Fiala tears himself away from the

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

sideboard, to finish his customary tour of the room at the place where his heart, when he is alone, experiences its most exquisite satisfaction.

The group photograph is hung somewhat low and adorned with ancient branches whose glassy brown foliage resembles the wings of gigantic insects. On it, in gold letters, are engraved the words: "To Herr Fiala, from the officials of the National Treasury Office, Vienna, 1910." This is no ordinary gift, for as a rule, high officials do not bestow their portraits upon subordinates. How often do you fancy those two severe councillors would, with indulgent patience, yield their countenances to the photographer for a purpose such as this? But Herr Fiala, at the moment, is not greatly moved by this distinction. He scarcely even bestows more than a passing thought upon the vindication which the photograph represents. For it is quite certain, you know, that it was Pech, the per-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

sonnel manager, who was to blame for pensioning him off prematurely. Who can say whether, at the time, the manager wasn't merely seeking a place for some favourite of his own? A man isn't pensioned off, at fifty, of his own free will. And if he had really been so sick then, would he be alive today? Would the physician, before whom, following Schlesinger's injunction, he had presented himself yesterday, have pronounced him in good health, after a most searching examination of his heart? Well, God alone knows if the wicked Pech, together with his favourite, has not fallen lower than himself!

But just now, the spectator of this photographic parting gift is not oppressed by such reflections as these. He is engaged in an impassioned scrutiny of the personage who is seated in sumptuous dignity between the two lean councillors. This personage is the only one in the picture with his head covered. He wears a large three-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

cornered hat, bright with silver lace. Moreover, this personage is wearing a heavy corded fur coat, which doubles—nay, triples—his bulk. The sleeves are trimmed with gold, like the sleeves of a general. Finally, his thickly gloved hands rest on a long black staff, topped with a silver ball. On the whole, he gives the effect of a more stately likeness of another omnipotent person, who used to rule the empire in other and more orderly times. . . . Is this, then, the man who was put down as an invalid? This man who, with quiet dignity, would step out of his porter's box and vigilantly fill almost the entire entrance of the administration building? This man, to whose solitary grandeur the passing school children would timidly raise their eyes? This man, who felt it as a sort of insult to his power and glory when, in the course of his duties, people would accost him with such trifles as the location of offices, and the like? This man, who would vouchsafe information in

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

an icy and controlled voice, only after he had, with forced indulgence, brought himself to grant the questioner his attention?

Herr Fiala is absorbed in attentively listening to the rumours of all this majesty. Not for a moment does it occur to him to compare the threadbare old man standing before the picture with the broad, imposing figure of another day. The imposing figure, on the one hand, and, on the other, the watchman, who at this time of the year totters past shivering in his patched frock coat—these are two entirely separate persons. Except that they both still have the same style of beard! But who would presume to compare the spreading, arrogant, imperial beard of the one in uniform with the two humble, scrubby tufts that hang, thin and gray and drooping, from the cheeks of the other?

Fiala himself would be the last to make such a comparison. He merely gazes and gazes at the picture. To him, it is as an



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

altar. It diffuses an atmosphere of power and joy. For that reason, he is a little ashamed, too, and always a little afraid that he will be surprised in the midst of his reverie. At this very moment he turns round, in fear lest the kitchen door should open suddenly.

And now, for the first time, he becomes aware that the room has undergone a gay and splendid metamorphosis, for the table in front of the sofa is covered. Covered with a beautiful red tablecloth! Yes, and there are even napkins—and the best cups have been taken out, the cups that had once belonged to his mother-in-law, the confectioner of Kralowitz!

“Where could the women have been hiding these things all this time?”

Perhaps some such question is trying to arise in Fiala’s mind; but he cannot utter it. Instead, a mist of pleasant sensations, rosy like the tablecloth, sweeps over him. For this was the way it used to be, every

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Sunday before the war. What has happened? These cups, these napkins, this tablecloth—it means the resurrection of the man of the group photograph, in all his fur-muffled glory. Herr Fiala, still very confused and enveloped in his rosy cloud, surrenders himself incredulously to the dream. The pleasure of the moment is intensified by his secret, the agreement effected through Schlesinger and sealed by the power of medical authority. After all, a man can still count on a respectable end. Nothing is missing. There is the beautiful table-linen. In its immaculate folds lie preserved the good old days, those days when he used to stand in the portals, lusty and powerful; when everything came easily and hardship was unknown. With God's help, everything will again be as it once was. Now the poorhouse no longer casts its shadow, and even Franzl will always have enough, so that he shall not have to go to the Asylum.

## II

HERR FIALA is still absorbed in these agreeable ruminations when his wife, carrying the coffee tray, makes her way, with difficulty, through the door. He is astonished at the appearance of the tray, for not only does it contain two pitchers for coffee and cream (which they never have), but also a large heap of ingenious pastries, Spanish puff-cakes, nut tarts, twists, and slices of layer cake. It is here that Frau Fiala, the confectioner's daughter, excels. But for whom is she now displaying her art? Formerly, she was accustomed to bake only when she wished to express her gratitude to those rich ladies of her acquaintance who were occasionally generous to her. At the moment, Frau Fiala is embarrassed and confused, because she is looked to for an ex-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

planation of her graciousness, and because this celebration, for which she has prepared with joyous anticipation all day, now seems to her, too, more than a little extraordinary.

“Karl—it’s for your birthday!”

But suddenly the reason does not seem sufficient to her. The idea and the desire had come to her quite suddenly. After all, she still owned some good table-linen. And her husband, poor man, wears himself out with worry and is always dejected when he comes home. Never goes out in the evenings, never asks for anything. Doesn’t drink, doesn’t smoke. She had thought of all that this morning. A man must have some enjoyment, even when he is old. And perhaps these thoughts weren’t all that had come to her mind. Perhaps she, too, had glanced at the group photograph and had caught an impulse from it.

Herr Fiala has not yet regained his composure. He blinks at his wife as if he

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

has just awakened out of a sleep. Is that a black silk shirtwaist she is wearing, with buttons of artificial jet? That's from the old days, too! And she's wearing her set of false teeth—something she never does nowadays, for they've long since become too large for her!

Herr Fiala sees his wife as he had forgotten she could look. He hears that today his birthday—his name-day—is celebrated. There are ten thousand of them, ten thousand Karls. And all of them are celebrating their name-day today. The thought fills him with a comforting pride. For if the other Karls celebrate, why shouldn't he? He thinks of his secret, and the thought seems to fade into the cadence of a long forgotten polka. Clumsily, he follows the old fashioned rhythm born within him, and he touches his wife's pitiful hips and shoulders. The time is long gone by when a kiss . . .

They sit down to enjoy themselves. A

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

thick coat of cream is swimming on the top of the coffee. After a moment of awkward restraint, two lumps of sugar are sacrificed to each cup. Even the room, for a moment, harmonizes with this idyl of comfort. The feverish, wan light seems to soften, and the shabby poverty is deceptively transformed in a comfortable dimness, as if to indicate that, for a moment, Karl Fiala and the fur-muffled erstwhile doorman of the National Treasury Office are one and the same person.

This transformation exists as long as neither of them speaks. Unluckily, however, Herr Fiala permits himself to give utterance to one heartfelt remark, which abruptly recalls the drab world of everyday.

“Thank God, Klara isn’t home!”

Frau Fiala is afraid of her sister. Until this mention of her name, she, too, has rejoiced in being alone with her old hus-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

band; but now, unfortunately, she is driven into her habitual position of defence. For Klara forms the bone of contention between the couple. Herr Fiala, too, is afraid of his sister-in-law. Often he lies awake in the nights, dreading the woman close by in the kitchen. Hadn't she twice threatened him with a broom? And when old age and weakness come upon him, she'll surely use it, and without mercy. He is obsessed with a vision of himself being furiously struck with the broomstick, squarely in his right eye. Already he can feel it poignantly—his eye swells and burns. But all the while, the generous portion of his nature has recourse to the usual routine of excuses:—Klara is a disappointed woman; she has been reduced to her present condition by her hard life of service; all old maids are shrewish; and, after all, she has a good heart, and still better arms for hard work.

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Herr Fiala turns away from the contemplation of a bitter destiny, beyond all hope of improvement.

“Where’s Franzl?”

“Gone for wood.”

The door bell rings. It is Herr Schlesinger, the insurance agent. He often visits the Fialas for a little chat. Because, first of all, he, too, comes from Kralowitz; and then, he lives on the same floor. He stops short in the doorway, and makes a clicking noise with his tongue before he speaks, addressing the question more to himself than to the old couple:

“What’s up?”

The visit fills Fiala with excitement. His rather staring blue eyes are turned confusedly upon the agent in whose hands lies his self-imposed secret. As for Frau Fiala, she cannot suppress the housewifely pride that bids her set before this superior connoisseur her napkins, her finest crockery, and her most delicious cakes. She



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

fetches another cup, pours coffee, and invites him to sit down, as is fitting and proper.

But before Schlesinger takes a seat, he makes a significant gesture with his expressive head:

“It’s easy to see now who has the money!”

He, too, has already passed his fiftieth year; he has a bald, shiny pate and a tiny, closely clipped gray moustache adheres to his upper lip. Conscious of his dignity, he holds himself very erect. He contemplates what is set before him with satisfaction, and makes it clear that he is aware of Frau Fiala’s origin, and that he is well acquainted with the name of Werka, the confectioner. But he has recognised it only insofar as it furnishes him with the cue for another name—his own. Here is the theme that lies the closest to his heart, as one can perceive by the lugubrious tone of his question:

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

“The firm of Markus Schlesinger, Ringplatz, Kralowitz—you knew it, didn’t you?”

Frau Fiala assents vigorously.

“Knitwear, dry-goods, delicatessen, imported fruits, provisions, tobacco. A regular warehouse, it was! Without my blessed father, Kralowitz and all the country round would have perished. Am I right, or am I wrong?”

But the old woman is rapt in a vision of her own past.

“Was my father the most respected merchant in the Square, or was he not? Tell me that, Frau Fiala!”

Frau Fiala has never been of a different opinion. But Schlesinger lets his voice sink to a tone of restrained bitterness as he says:

“And now, I’ll ask you, wasn’t my father a *Schlemihl* to sell such a wonderful business? Why did he have to go to Vienna,

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

and throw away his whole capital on the stock exchange!"

Herr Fiala would like to recount his own similar experience. Perhaps it would have been better for him, too, never to have left his native town. But Schlesinger cuts him short with a gesture. He will not suffer any interruption in the presentation of his tragedy:

"At this very moment, I might be standing in front of my big show windows in the Ringplatz. Four show windows, and behind them, a first-class display of goods! Yes, I might be standing there now, looking out across the Square. Suppose customers come—you think I would have to bother? That would be the business of the staff . . . A fine time I'm having now, looking out across the Square. Because my blessed father was a *Schlemihl*, I have become a *Schnorrer*!"

Despairingly, Schlesinger bites off the

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

end of his Havana with his widely separated incisors, rolls the cigar greedily in his mouth, and lights it.

“A fine profession I have now! Always breaking into my clients’ houses! And the clients—stubborn as the miller’s donkey! They think death is a swindle—so why should they insure their life? And they’re right, too!”

Fiala looks at him with astonishment, which compels Schlesinger to make amends for his professional skepticism by exclaiming, with a jovial smile:

“Of course, our Fiala, over there, has hit it right with me!”

As this exclamation is not particularly comprehensible, he hastens to add, in his own abrupt manner, with a groan:

“I would rather have been a photographer!”

No one sees fit to ask why the sighing Schlesinger would rather have been a photographer. He offers no further explanation.

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

tion, but rises from his chair and walks to and fro in the tiny room, nervously touching the things on the table or brushing them with his sleeve:

“Can you imagine how many stairs I climb every day? When I reach the coffee house at eight o’clock, I’m absolutely played out; so tired, I can’t even touch a card. For that reason alone, you ought to understand why I lay claim to such a commission. It troubled me before. But now! Often I can’t move my left arm, it hurts so much. And I must stop every ten steps, because I can’t catch my breath. I’m old, and I’m a *Schnorrer*. Maybe that’s not enough, eh?”

Frau Fiala takes a more optimistic point of view, and begins to chant the praises of Schlesinger’s youthfulness. But he silences her curtly, and says;

“Do you know what, Frau Fiala? A man of fifty is older than a man of seventy. At fifty, danger is near. I feel it. But your

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

husband is already past the mark. He should live to be a hundred!"

As he says this, he lifts high the whiskey-glass which the old lady has meanwhile filled, and toasts Fiala. Then he sits down with another groan:

"We smoke too much, we Jews."

But he corrects himself quickly:

"Pardon me! I'm not a Jew—you'll please note that! I've decided for the Holy Virgin, you know."

Schlesinger is plainly alarmed at his own words. He becomes very serious, and bows his head. But the Fialas are not in the least conscious of his daring cynicism. They look at him, blinking. Then he murmurs, with sudden humility, closing the subject:

"Yes, it's better for business."

He is silent, looking straight ahead of him, forebodingly. Fiala is uneasy. There are many questions which he would like to ask the insurance agent. His wife has left

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

the room, but he has no time to unburden himself, for she returns immediately.

Schlesinger's vaunting of his family's position at Kralowitz has incited her to a little boasting upon her own account. It is evident that she has taken the opportunity to remove her false teeth; now she returns with a small wooden box. Her shrivelled fingers rummage busily in a tangled heap of velvet ribbons, pieces of silk, black braid, and the like; there is a clink of buckles and broken glass ornaments. But the principal treasures are reposing at the bottom of the family strong-box. Marie Fiala, too, is of no common origin; she, too, has souvenirs of Kralowitz and of her relatives to exhibit. Now Herr Schlesinger must take the proffered photograph, which he does with undisguised nonchalance and the right amount of dignified boredom. The Fialas, man and wife, have always felt a need to preserve, by means of pictures, the solemn, alas, so

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

infrequent, moments of their existence. The art of photography has a profound significance in their lives. He has his favourite picture, she has hers; and it is the latter with which the representative of the Tutelia is now fanning himself, with a nervous, indifferent gesture. Frau Fiala explains:

“That’s my parents’ grave in the cemetery at Kralowitz.”

And, in fact, the cabinet size photograph does represent a monument, and even the censorious Schlesinger is compelled to admit that it is an opulent grave, with a splendid piece of greensward, encircled by dignified, respectable chains. He puts his head to one side to indicate respect, and in his vague way, which always casts a sort of gloom over his words, he remarks:

“At the Central Cemetery, one can see . . .”

But the picture reveals still more. It



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

shows Frau Fiala herself in an arrogantly billowing dress with mutton-chop sleeves and a hat with a large plume, from which a veil is drooping. There she is, standing between the similarly adorned, then still high-bosomed Klara, and Karl, who has given her his arm, and who is wearing gloves and a high silk hat.

To be sure, Schlesinger has his private opinion about the good taste of this exhibit, but he signifies his appreciation, lightly and good-naturedly. Suddenly Frau Fiala utters a shriek, as if she had now for the first time discovered the indignity, the affront offered her. Her voice breaks:

“The ragamuffin!”

And, of a truth, one cannot ignore such an ignominy or be deceived concerning it. At precisely the same moment, it would seem, a ragamuffin had likewise made his appearance in the cemetery at Kralowitz, and from behind the splendid gravestone,

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

in back of the family engaged in the task of perpetuating itself, he is showing his teeth in a mocking grimace and sticking out his tongue at the photographer. For all eternity, like Fate!

What can Herr Schlesinger do, except add his condemnation of the malicious urchin and return the picture to its possessor? She shuts the black box hurriedly, for there is a knock at the door. No time is left to show the visitor the picture of her two beautiful and airily clad nieces, who have enjoyed a great success as vaudeville dancers and are now under contract for South America.

Franzl enters, without greeting any one, and, passing the old people with unseeing eyes, walks into the kitchen, where he lets his burden of firewood fall to the floor with a clatter. He is known as the lanky, gloomy Franzl; he is thirty-three years old. As Frau Fiala explains, he has fits. For Franzl is an epileptic; he has

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

frequent seizures, forgets the errands he is sent on, and consequently, is useless for any trade, although he tramps round all day long, looking for work. People generally rid themselves of such creatures for the benefit of the community by entrusting them to the public institutions founded for exactly this purpose. It should be said that Franzl's mother has often been of a mind to demand for her child the advantages of the workingmen's benefit institutions. Whenever these impulses seize her, she explains to her husband how she has heard that, now that the well-fed, rubicund city fathers are controlling the Steinhof Asylum, the food there is excellent, better than the boy can get at home. But Herr Fiala doesn't see the joke. The gentle, humble old man reverts to his former posture of arrogance. Franzl shall stay here! As long as he himself still has breath in his body, he will care for the boy—and who knows, even longer!

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

In the meantime, Frau Fiala has been offering food to her son.

“Won’t you eat something, Franzl? Coffee, sugar cakes?”

But Franzl merely looks dully at the old woman; his lifeless glance seems to say: “Have I deserved this?” Then he sits down on a chest in the kitchen and stares into the gathering twilight, as he does every day. With the coming of evening, Frau Fiala feels herself slowly invaded by fear. Klara is due home at any minute. She slips into the kitchen with the tea-things, and cautiously hides the cups and jugs. Her hands tremble as she hastily folds the delicate linen and puts it away in the small room.

Herr Schlesinger is also beginning to feel uncomfortable. The appearance of Franzl always deprives him of his poise. He cannot bear the sight of pain, and feels it as a personal affront when death and sickness intrude themselves upon him. Af-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

ter all, it is his business to insure people against these natural misfortunes. He thanks Herr Fiala hastily, and takes his leave. But Fiala eagerly follows him out to the landing. Here he can ask his questions undisturbed, for he commands a view of the stairs which Klara must ascend. His hand trembles as he removes the insurance policy from his pocketbook.

“Tell me, Herr Schlesinger, is it all right? Is everything in order?”

Upon occasions of this sort, the agent takes out and adjusts a well worn pince-nez and shifts rapidly from a personal to a business tone, which is the instrument that enables him to “break the ice” with his clients on his daily round.

“My dear Herr Fiala! to employ the technical language of insurance, you’ve made an A Number One arrangement.”

The old man hangs on every word that flows so facilely from this talented mouth. First of all, he receives a little scientific in-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

formation, based on experience and couched "in the technical language of insurance." Schlesinger buttonholes him and says:

"All right, you have scratched together a miserable few millions. Millions is good! All rubbish! Not worth a heller! Suppose you had come to me and said: 'Schlesinger, should I eat up the money?' What do you think I should have told you?"

Fiala's dull blue eyes await with eager anxiety the reply that this hypothetical question would have elicited.

"I should have told you: 'Eat up the money!' For what could you do with it, anyhow? Put the trash in the bank? Perhaps you'd get fat on the interest! My friend, I'm telling you that all the banks today are going to rack and ruin. I'm telling you that the biggest men in the country are suspending payments. So, in the first place, the money would have done you no good, and in the second place, you would have lost it!"

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Herr Fiala, completely convinced by this demonstration, assents energetically.

“It was only out of friendship, Fiala, that I helped you out. I should make money out of you? God forbid! I should be ashamed to do it. All right—here you are, a vigorous man, in the prime of life. As the saying goes, you have nothing, but you manage to make a living out of it. A good living, too—anybody can see that. You feed your family today, as you’ll feed them tomorrow. Why should you eat up your miserable capital, or lose it by putting it out at interest? Now everything is fine, my friend. But suppose there comes a time when you can’t crawl round any more! And worse yet to come, maybe . . .”

The old man’s heart is penetrated by these words. He begins to nod vehement assent to Schlesinger.

“So what then, Herr Fiala? Now, that’s what I’ve already provided for—the ‘What then?’ *Then* comes the miracle. For

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

you haven't eaten up your little savings, and you haven't lost them in the bank. You've paid in a moderate premium. And the Tutelia stands up and gives its clients, not ten, not twenty percent interest, but two hundred, five hundred, a thousand percent. You give in a miserable pittance, and what do you get back! Capital!"

Fiala's state of illumination is complete. The document (in his hand) trembles. Painfully, he tries to elicit the last piece of desired information.

"And when . . . when will . . . they pay out the money?"

Schlesinger comes directly to the point. He moistens his finger and turns the pages of the contract.

"It should be here . . . here it is——  
'And we bind ourselves, should the demise occur after the completion of the sixty-fifth year . . .'"

Schlesinger looks up enthusiastically, and says, with a laugh:



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

“You’re sixty-four, and you’ll live to be a hundred. And after the sixty-fifth year is completed, then comes the payment. A single year—that’s highly reasonable, generally! You can take my word for it, the Tutelia is the only company that gives such liberal settlements today!”

The sound of shuffling footsteps is heard on the winding staircase. Fiala replaces his contract in haste and disappears into his lodgings. Herr Schlesinger groans heavily and takes his key out of his pocket.

### III

THE first thing Klara does when she comes home is to take off her shoes and stockings. She makes a principle of walking round the house barefoot, so as to save shoe leather. Her feet are dreadfully swollen; the only shoes that fit them are those worn by a gigantic dentist for whom she works. It is probable that she will inherit in perpetuity the wornout footgear of this colossal individual. Her bosom, at one time the pride, not only of herself, but of her elder sister, has long since almost disappeared, together with most of her hair. Knotted tightly about her neck is a dirty kerchief, which is never removed. Beneath this kerchief extends a long, bony, mottled physiognomy, that can assume any and all

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

expressions. No one can lower her lids in a more guileless and sanctimonious manner than she, when surprised by her mistress in the act of devouring some tidbit left over from a meal. When money or jewels happen to get lost, no one can possibly join in the search with more enthusiasm, even frenzy. On the other hand, no one is subject to more spiteful outbursts of temper . . . Klara is an example of spiritual degeneration; her heart cherishes no memories, no photographs of great moments of her life. She is quite without any desire for fine linen, for delicate and fragile things. The great wooden chest, containing treasures at which she occasionally hints, has not been unpacked for years. It would never enter her head to do what her sister Marie did today, when, in celebration of her poor husband's birthday, she set the table, transforming it into something cosy and beautiful. Klara, indeed, immediately senses an exceptional

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

occurrence in the air. She sniffs and blinks, and demands:

“What have you been making? Coffee?”

Frau Fiala is overwhelmed by mortal fear. Her reply is almost inaudible.

“No, Klarinka, I’ve just been making tea. You know, the same weak tea we always have.”

But the hesitating answer is sufficient to arouse Klara’s dangerous ire. Compressing her lips, she begins to make the kitchen feel the weight of her mood. She flings things noisily into the corners. Furiously, she displaces the pots and pans on the stove, as if to separate her own possessions from those of the Fialas. She is quite oblivious of her sister’s presence. Finally, she unties the bundle which she has brought home with her, revealing all sorts of curious articles, such as one would expect to find only in rubbish heaps: two dried apples, bits of porcelain, some empty sardine tins, candle-ends, cigarette car-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

tons, pieces of string, and, as a prize exhibit, a man's tattered shirt. With excited movements, Klara piles up her booty in her own special corner, which no one dares to approach on peril of his life. Hoping to restore herself in her sister's good graces by evincing admiration, Frau I'iala asks how she has come by this collection of treasures. The old maid turns on her violently:

"I've stolen it, I suppose. What's that? You dare to call me a thief, a thief, when these are all presents, every one of them! . . ."

Her mouth is distorted; her eyes and nose become red and watery; she utters a succession of short, piercing screams, and her lamentation, punctuated by sobs and snuffles, begins. She has fallen among wicked people. She can't stand it much longer. She will find some other place to sleep. *She* is no thief, though everybody around her is. She has to live here, in the

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

very centre of extravagance and dissipation, among people who make coffee in secret and bake cakes which they keep from her, but offer to a Jew! Such spendthrifts have no notion of how to live. These years have taught them nothing! Stupid fools, crazy spendthrifts—they don't even know what things are worth. Whenever she brings home her presents, they laugh at her, the idiots! That's what she gets for being thrifty and knowing the value of things! . . .

Frau Fiala, aware by this time that the situation is beyond remedy, slips quietly out into the little bedroom.

As soon as Klara is alone, she rushes to the place where she suspects that the hidden dainties are concealed. The first raid discloses them. She takes three cakes from the plate, leaving one, and deposits the booty in one of the numerous sardine tins which adorn her own particular corner. There the cakes, like many other

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

dainties before them, will grow stale and crumble away. . . .

But, in order to forestall even the slightest question, she determines to exercise her terrible dictatorship today more vigorously than ever. And so she raises a new outcry. Somebody has broken open her box! After a due and proper interval of shrill screams, the whimpering Klara is soothed, though not convinced, by her elder sister. Her box has been desecrated by impious hands, and so it will remain. Even a blind man could plainly tell that by the condition of the cords with which the box is tied.

Meanwhile, Herr Fiala is sitting in the dark room, for the light is never turned on in the evenings. One uses light only at meals and at bedtime. Besides, does he need light now? Round his head still floats a roseate cloud of bliss, enfolding him so tenderly that he does not hear a word of Klara's chronic tirade. He feels as one who

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

has escaped from some mortal peril, who has overcome some tremendous difficulty. For is he not saved indeed by the document in his pocket? The future no longer looms dreadfully before him; no malicious fate lurks in his doorway. The street-cars to Lainz may go their way in peace. The sight of their motormen and conductors will no longer fill his heart with dread. Security at last, after so many terrible years; a voluptuous sentiment of security, that invites him to the armchair beside the sewing table.

To think that human beings can reap advantage from death itself! Fiala has a sensation of astonishment, almost of awe, at the spectacle of mankind's progress. Franzl will not be put out on the street, nor thrown into the Steinhof; and after all, that is the main thing. What more can one ask? Nothing—or perhaps one thing only. A mere trifle, but how sweet it would be! The group photograph on the wall is



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

shrouded in darkness. Fiala can no longer envisage himself in his ancient pomp, nor see the petty officials between whom his splendour is enthroned. But there is another whom he can now see quite plainly, the one who had lost him his position, his only foe, the essence of enmity, the personnel director and head-official—Herr Pech! If only Herr Pech were here to witness the fact that a respectable man, unjustly dealt with, but surviving sixty years of hunger and war, can, despite all this, come to a respectable end! Herr Pech, to be sure, has been an inmate of Lainz for a long time. People better than he, councillors and majors, go begging from door to door in the winter, pale and anxious, without overcoats. Herr Fiala would like to be walking through the poorhouse garden with Marie and Franzl. There he would see Herr Pech, cowering miserably on a bench; he would pass by him slowly and, pointing to himself and his fam-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

ily, he would say: "Now, do you see!"

Blissful as it is, even this vision is at length interrupted by the uproar going on outside in the hall. Klara is playing her final trump card. Her shrewish, cackling voice, like that of the seven-headed dragon of the tale, is accusing the tenants on the same floor of having robbed her. As is often the case in old houses, several tenants are here obliged to share the use of the most necessary of places, which is at the end of the hallway, detached from the other rooms. Klara insists that in this very spot she had made herself a hiding-place, where she had always placed the box—the box which is now stolen. Not a corner of the house is safe from thievish hands, says Klara. That was why she had chosen that particular spot. Klara's high treble is answered by a good deal of shouting and laughter. A pacific bass ventures a mild inquiry as to the treasures contained in this box, which had been thus strangely

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

deposited and is now purloined. Klara shrieks:

“Thread from before the war!”

At this answer, the terrific clamour resolves itself into an outburst of wild gaiety. Frau Fiala steals in to her husband. She herself is willing enough to endure Klara’s insults, but when the squabble is carried into the hall, among strange people, she is ashamed for her sister and feels like creeping away and hiding herself. Now she expects that her husband will make some complaint about his sister-in-law. She has even made up her mind to agree with his complaint, to abandon their difference, and finally concede that he is right. But something is wrong with Fiala—he utters not a word of protest; he even consoles her. With a gesture of disdain, he says:

“Let her alone!”

He rises. He stands upright and proud, like a young man, like the one-time door-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

man of the National Treasury Office. In the gloom, he unfolds a paper, as if he were about to read something from it. Then he takes her old hand, and the words (even if they are only Schlesinger's words) flow from his lips, and the silence is broken. He explains everything to his wife; the great secret, the miracle of the insurance. Both of them are saved for ever. After his death, Marie will receive a fortune, a veritable fortune, two hundred, five hundred, a thousand percent on the wretched proceeds derived from the sale of the old house and the surplus furniture.

And so it turns out that this is, indeed, a festal birthday. It was not without a deeper premonition of joy that Marie had unfolded the red tablecloth. But now she is weeping. She has wept on other and less august occasions, but tears of joy, such as these, are infrequent. Her sobs continue.

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

“My husband!” is all that she can say.

But after an interval, Klara’s sister asks an important question:

“And when . . . when do they pay out the money?”

It is well that by this time it is quite dark. But to Fiala, his wife’s curiosity is perfectly comprehensible. He declaims the words:

“‘If death takes place after the completion of the sixty-fifth year . . .’ ”

And with the utter egoism of a mighty testator, he gives his order:

“You hear—Franzl stays here! Franzl is not to leave the house!”

Franzl has fled from the uproar. He stands before the door of the house, gazing dully down the street and over the city which, harassed and worn with long suffering, poorly lit, is surrendering itself to the freshness of the night. The

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

street-cars clang by with a sharp, unfriendly sound. The cars bound toward the centre of the city are empty; those returning are crowded. Franzl is tired. All day long he has been visiting employment bureaus, tramping from one agency to another. He knows perfectly well that he will find no work, that all these efforts are useless. But it is a way of passing the time which is so tedious and painful to him. A street-car rounding the turntable screeches like a tortured animal. A convulsive madness seizes Franzl's weak brain. Old questions, terrible questions, clamour for utterance; but he is never strong enough to formulate them, to ask: "Why must I live?" The poor wretch is shaken by a desire to run, across the tracks, through the suburbs, out of the city; to keep running, out, out into the night, till his body drops to the earth, emptied of its heavy life.

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

But all he does is to slink back sullenly into the house. He is only too well acquainted with that accursed desire for freedom which always precedes a seizure.

## IV

SOME time had passed. It was November. Since Fiala's birthday, nothing had happened worthy of being mentioned in the same breath with the solemn and secret celebration which Frau Fiala had dedicated to her husband.

Every evening, Klara returned home with her usual burdens. Her inventive faculty, which enabled her to persevere in her accusations of mankind and the world in general, developed with practice. Each night she would present a new bill of complaints, and there was no way of telling if the account would ever be settled. Her sister, however, who had long since come to terms with her, defended her against every one. As for Herr Fiala, day after day, from eight in the morning till two



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

o'clock in the afternoon, he stood in the draughty warehouse department and noted, in a soiled day-book, the various articles sent out or returned. Back in his room, he would resume his customary circuit, ending at the group photograph. Nor had Franzl abandoned the meaningless search for work which always ended with a dumb silence at the question: "Are you healthy?" As the twilight gathered, he would be found, passive and immobile, sitting on the chest in the kitchen.

Only Herr Schlesinger had disappeared one day, and his whereabouts were unknown.

No one could notice any change in Herr Fiala. None of his office associates, no stranger, and certainly none of the lodgers. Franzl alone had glanced attentively at his father once or twice. It is true that there was nothing particularly remarkable about him, except an increasing taciturnity—often he would not open his

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

mouth all day long—and a new kind of stubborn determination, observable in his carriage and deportment. But perhaps Franzl had his own reasons for giving the old man that occasional attentive glance. November had come. Often, on such November mornings, a dense, gray mist arises and, shrouding the next house, not twenty paces distant, hides it from the sight of man. In such a way, Herr Fiala's countenance seemed to be rendered indistinct and to be withdrawn from men's sight by a dense, gray mist.

It so happened that, one afternoon, the women were not at home. What was there for Frau Marie Fiala and Fräulein Klara Wewerka to do at home on All Souls' Day? Christmas, Easter, Corpus Christi Day, Pentecost—none of these signified holiday to the sisters' hearts. All Souls' Day alone was a day of rejoicing. It was a pity that they had no relative of their own buried at Vienna, that they owned no

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

grave in the Simmering Cemetery which they might decorate with flowers and candles. But, heavy as was this privation, it did not prevent the two of them from making their appearance, early in the afternoon, before the gates of the great Central Cemetery of Vienna. Even the trolley ride had been different, more exciting than usual. In every corner of the over-crowded cars waved wreaths of flowers. At the back, beautifully encircling the car number and the searchlight, a gigantic wreath of white asters flaunted its splendour in the faces of the astonished pedestrians. Every imaginable degree of floral oblation was represented, from the glorious sacrificial gifts of the rich down to cheap festoons of evergreen leaves and durable artificial wreaths. From the centre of the car arose the insupportable odour of funereal flowers. These blooms have a thick, pungent smell, because they suffer from that very process of decomposition

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

which they are intended to disguise. But there was still another odour that pressed closely against the rattling walls and windows of the narrow car. This was the smell of cheap, black material, rain-sodden by reason of many cemetery visits—an aroma of musty hats, veils, mourning clothes, things that are kept with camphor balls tightly shut in moldy chests from one funeral to another; and above all these odours arose the smell produced by colds in the head, coughing, sore throats, and catarrh. But Maria Fiala and Klara did not permit such trifles to disturb their excited, expectant happiness. They loved this press of people. Such crowds always promised an exciting spectacle. And it was a gigantic mass-spectacle, indeed, that was visible in the square in front of the Central Cemetery. An endless procession of red trolley-cars approached and turned the loop, clanking, clanging, screeching. Mounted policemen were in readiness, la-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

bouring in vain to force the disorderly throng into line. Stubborn and senseless as an element—which, in truth, was what it was—the mob continued to storm the barred entrances. Even the traffic policeman, for whom a tower had been specially erected by the community, could do nothing but confuse his helpless companions by his pathetic signalling. Behind one of the gates stood a closely drawn-up row of ambulances. Business was likely to be brisk at this annual autumn fair of the dead; some poor weakling or another might meet with an accident, so that, the next time, he would be found, not among the celebrants, but among those celebrated.

Thanks to Klara's sharp elbows and pitiless methods of locomotion, the sisters soon crowded through the gate. They forced their way down the grand avenue of the dead, and through the swarming hall leading to the elaborate mausoleums; they entered the chapel for a moment, hast-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

ily sprinkled themselves with the holy water, and made the sign of the Cross and their genuflexions to God; then they passed through the parkway, treading underfoot the crackling, withered leaves, and finally, after much effort, emerged where the cemetery stretched out before them like a misty plain in which the young trees were no higher than the thickly planted rows of crosses and gravestones. This was where they hoped to meet their acquaintances, other old women, born in Bohemia, with whom they intended to visit upon this festive occasion.

For all these humble people were holding receptions today, making a mutual celebration in honour of the corpses. With a formal smile, with one's best company manners, exchanging greetings, one made one's way to the consecrated spot belonging to some family which one knew. From the lips of the visitors was often heard the courteous remark: "How beautifully he lies

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

there!” And then all present would lower their heads to examine, with polite interest, the square grass-plot which held no terrors for them. Cakes and ham sandwiches were hospitably shared, and the bottle was passed round. The good wife whose relatives were buried there would smile happily, as if some one had praised her table or her household furnishings. She would rearrange the flowers on the tomb, give a slight pull to one of the chain-like links, and set the lamps in the correct position, thus lending a final touch of perfection to the ensemble. But all this was merely in preparation for the great hour. And that great hour soon came. The mist grew coffee-coloured and so thick that one could hack it with a knife. And over the wide, whispering plain, one after another, the feeble lights of the lamps flickered out in the darkness, innumerable, uncanny fire-works from the depths, a delicate mystical illumination, burning close to the ground,

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

like pit-lamps at the entrance to a mine, will-o'-the-wisps of frivolous remembrance, wavering in the autumnal mist.

At about this hour, Herr Fiala was sitting in his kitchen, drinking weak tea, this time prepared by Franzl. Fiala balanced the saucer on his knee, and kept dipping a piece of bread abstractedly into the unsweetened liquid. The meal lasted a very long time, and not a word was spoken on either side.

Suddenly Fiala's voice broke the silence. It sounded strange, hard, decisive, like a command:

"Franzl, run over to the General Hospital. Go to Wotawa—he's one of the directors. He'll know all about it. Ask him if there's a bed vacant. But run, so that you'll be back quickly—before the women come."

Franzl had never before received an order from his father. Fiala demanded



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

nothing from the boy in the way of errands or help. This time, however, he had given a command, curtly, almost rudely. But Franzl seemed not in the least surprised. He looked almost as if he had long been expecting this or some similar order; as if his father's word of command had relieved some oppressive tension that lay between them; as if it had at last given a name to something unexpressed and, in so doing, had abolished the brooding silence. The epileptic took his cap and, without saying good-bye, without turning his head, left the room.

With hands even more than usually steady, Fiala lit a candle—did he dare to be so bold today?—and moved into the next room. This time, he renounced his customary circuit; he did not hold up the candle to gaze at the picture of his former night. Instead, he sat down at the table near the sofa, and took from his pocket a calendar which he had brought with him.

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Thoughtfully, he tore off leaf after leaf from the untouched pad, deliberately giving himself up to the contemplation of each day, with its black or red number, as if these bold-lettered dates were associated in his life with Heaven knows what events and matters of great importance. And so he gradually approached the November holiday—today's holiday. But now, with no more sheets to tear off, his hands moved more and more slowly; he gazed for a long time at each new day announced by the black or red number. With each leaf the task became harder and harder, as if, in turning over the pages, he must, at the same time, turn over all the pain and agony of the time which they represented. Thus, it was no slight matter, proceeding at this slow pace, to arrive at the thirty-first of December. But, like the end of a difficult journey, it was reached at last. Herr Fiala ended by taking a few of the first days of the ensuing year and, for

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

some mysterious reason, adding them on the pad after the last sheet.

A considerable interval had been passed in this occupation, and he scarcely had time to stuff the few sheets into a little old pocket before Franzl appeared and announced that Fiala's acquaintance, Herr Wotawa, was ready to see him.

Their footsteps echoing loudly, they descended the stairs and stepped into the street. The son turned toward the corner where the cars stopped, but the father disdainfully rejected this mode of travel and, holding himself well in hand, struck out at a brisk pace, being scrupulously careful not to fall out of step. He began to talk of one thing and another, whatever the street chanced to suggest to him; but not a word did he utter that seemed relevant, not a word concerning his sickness, or the hospital, or possible consequences and arrangements. There was not even a message for the mother. Nor did Franzl make any

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

inquiry concerning his father's condition. Their conversation turned on the fact that the 175th car route was running only two instead of three extra coaches, because all the superfluous cars were being used for the Central Cemetery line. It then occupied itself with the torn-up pavements, with the shortening of the route, with the question of whether the tobacco shops were open at this hour. Passing one, Fiala asked Franzl to buy him a late newspaper. Franzl bought it. His father had not waited for him, however, but had gone on quickly, walking with an even stride, as if he feared to stop, or could not do so.

Soon they were in the Alserstrasse. They traversed the hospital court and, in his office, they found Herr Wotawa, one of Fiala's erstwhile colleagues in the National Treasury Office. He scrutinized Fiala dubiously:

“You come here like a hussar, and ex-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

pect to be taken in. My dear fellow, nowadays every one with a cold in the head would like to be rewarded with three weeks here, free board and lodging, and first-class meals. What's the trouble with you? . . . I don't suppose it's a mere trifle! Well, we shall see. Come along!"

Herr Wotawa's influence was still good for something. In the reception room, Fiala's name was entered in the register. The entrance blank had to be filled out. The official asked for Fiala's date of birth and his age, and as he did so, he made the ill-tempered remark that old men generally do not themselves know the day and year of their birth. But here, as far as Herr Fiala was concerned, he was entirely deceived. In a metallic voice, quite unlike his usual tone, the old man made his declaration and, without being asked, to avoid all possibility of error, repeated it:

"Born on January 5, 1860, in Kralo-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

witz, Bohemia. Have lived in Vienna for the last thirty-five years. At present, a declared Austrian citizen. Catholic.”

He followed the writer’s hand critically :  
“January fifth!”

After this ceremony, the patient was conducted to the physician’s examining room, where the question of his admission was to be decided. The doctor on duty was a rather young man, who was serving his first year as an interne. As the youngest subordinate, he was, to use his own phrase, “the holiday goat”; that is, when a free day beckoned, by some curious coincidence, he was always sure to be the one on duty.

Dr. Burgstaller was lying on the sofa, his nicotine-stained hand outstretched, holding an extinguished cigarette. With an acute awareness of the annoying prospect of being frequently disturbed during the night, he had taken the opportunity of snatching a wink of sleep.

Fiala stepped up to him, as he had once

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

approached his regimental doctor, thirty years before, when he was a soldier. He held his head high, his middle fingers touching the seams of his trousers. The attitude perplexed Dr. Burgstaller. He walked round Fiala, puzzled, for he had not yet attained the calm indifference of his profession. In Fiala, he saw one of those old fellows who so often mocked his authority. Anticipating the possibility of disrespect, he addressed him brusquely:

“Well, what is it? What do you want? What’s your trouble?”

Fiala mumbled something and pointed to his chest. The doctor ordered:

“Undress!”

Then, immediately realizing that it might be dangerous to make a diagnosis, he revoked the command:

“Keep your clothes on!”

But, of course, something professional had to be done. Burgstaller felt Fiala’s wrist. If the young man’s watch was to be

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

trusted, the old fellow's pulse appeared alarmingly accelerated. After one gloomy glance at the disturber of his peace, he decided to pursue his duty, and accordingly placed a fever thermometer under Fiala's arm-pit.

While waiting, he addressed several sharp questions to the patient, so that the busy staff members in the room might know and respect his combined talents of personal superiority and medical knowledge. Fiala replied in loud and even tones, with the same stiff determination that for some time had taken possession of his whole being.

At last, Burgstaller held the thermometer under the lamp. Suddenly his face grew naïvely attentive.

“Why, man—you’ve got 102.7!”

And here, for the first time, our story of a death really begins. For we would not



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

have risked leading the reader into such a dismal and paltry world, if our narrative did not possess its own element of strangeness.

## V.

THE moment Fiala's body touched the white bed in the stifling hospital ward, all the grave illnesses dormant in his system—and they were many—seemed suddenly to develop. Perhaps it was the bed itself which was the cause—that narrow, white-lacquered, metal apparatus, hardly a bed in which a man rests, sleeps, dreams, and loves, but an ingenious, close-fitting machine, contrived for illness. It was astounding that a man should be able to walk round for a week with his body so debilitated, pursuing his daily occupation, and so completely deceiving those nearest to him as to his real condition. Several diagnoses were made on the spot, and the black slate above Fiala's head was more thickly covered with

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

the doctors' scribblings than any other in the ward.

Once she had recovered from her first fright, Frau Fiala began to feel a serious resentment against her husband, ascribable to the fact that she had not herself noticed that he had been ill for so long. And this resentment grew more intense whenever she was reproached for her carelessness. He had always been close-mouthed and artful, had Karl, and yet he looked as if he lacked the wit to count up to three. Who can tell, with such men? Her mood of dissatisfaction was vigorously supported by Klara, who was quite definite in her conviction that, behind all Fiala's fever and flight from home and his hospital confinement, a cunning design was concealed: the very refinement of self-interest, a deliberate intention of securing something valuable for himself. What man would walk out of the house without any warning, and put himself in the hospital? Besides, only

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

yesterday he was as healthy as anybody, wasn't he? And in addition, Frau Fiala felt that, despite their poverty and their cramped quarters, her husband would receive better care at home. As her resentment increased, it transferred itself to the hospital. Everybody knew perfectly well that the doctors, with an eye to the instruction of their students, were not really anxious to cure the free patients at all. On the contrary! They were careful to plant diseases in the body of the victims, and then display them to the students, all nicely prepared.

From the beginning, Fiala exhibited a resolute patience, unchanging and immovable. He looked no worse than on All Souls' Day. Quiet, almost rigid, he lay in bed as if rest and silence constituted a task to which a man needed to devote his entire attention. When necessary, he stood up, even at meal-times. Wearing his blue-white blouse, he would sit down with the other

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

patients who were "movable" and, employing all his will-power, he would force himself to devour his portion slowly, to the last spoonful. Every day, at the visiting hour, his wife came to the ward. He would look at her amiably, but somewhat remotely. Daily, she would arrive with some new brew, some new decoction in her market bag, which, in extreme terror of the attendants, she would smuggle into the ward. And the obedient Fiala would drink these beverages too, these magic potions brewed in the witches' kitchens of the suburbs. Often Klara would accompany his wife. But she was not satisfied merely with drawing a long face at her brother-in-law's bedside. With sanctimonious sweetness, she would shake her head wisely and give vent to her sentiments until she had exhausted her listener, at which point she would rise and visit the next patient. On tiptoe, with a deceptive air of detachment, she would approach the bedside; on her lips was a bitter

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

smile, from which you were to infer that her penetration saw through these tricks completely. It was a smile that provoked all the exploited patients to swear an oath of vengeance against her.

It did not take Klara long to acquire a thorough knowledge of a great deal of hospital scandal. She had noticed that the attendants drank up the best part of the afternoon coffee, and then diluted what was left. She had observed other attendants sharing cakes intended for the patients. She had caught the chief attendant striking a patient one moment, and in the next, hugging and kissing a pretty nurse in the corridor.

“Of course, I’m not saying anything. I haven’t seen a thing. No, of course not! Not a thing! It’s none of my business!”

And so the eavesdropper would make her disavowals, at the same time that her serpent’s tongue was confiding these shock-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

ing discoveries to the patients' startled ears.

The reader is aware that Klara could not endure to see anything wasted or escaping her protective grasp. Once she had to suffer interminable torture, with her eyes fixed on a tray full of left-overs from the dinner. On one of the plates was an entire meal, which some poor fellow had left untasted. The old spinster, summoning up all her strategy, at last succeeded in transferring to her pocket, unobserved, a piece of meat and three cold potatoes. In point of fact, Fiala had noticed it, but he calmly kept his gaze straight before him. He was conserving his strength for a different struggle now.

This condition lasted until nearly the end of November, his fever going up and down by turns. At last, however, the diagnosis indicated pleurisy and double inflammation of the lungs. These diseases flew at him like two tigers. He was lost. The

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

doctors were through with the patient, and ordered him to be transferred to a special sick-ward.

Frau Fiala was summoned to the office of the head physician. The professor was sitting at his desk; his first assistant stood beside him. Ungraciously, the great medical despot lay down his pen and growled to his assistant:

“Relation?”

“Fiala’s wife, Herr Professor! In Number Three ward. . . .”

The head physician made a half turn in his swivel chair and observed Frau Fiala.

“Well, my dear woman . . .”

Then he noticed that the old woman’s lower jaw had dropped in abject, cringing terror. Still a fine-looking man himself, he suffered from a physical repulsion at the sight of old women’s faces. He turned abruptly back to his reports, with a sign to his assistant:

“Here, you talk with her!”



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

The assistant smiled. Then he altered his manner to an expression of resignation and helplessness.

“My dear woman, you must be calm. Everything necessary and possible has been done, and will continue to be done. The poor man will have to suffer only eight, at most, ten days more. Rest assured that we will do everything in our power. But as I have said, you must be calm and prepared . . .”

The old woman stared dully at the speaker. Her lower jaw still hung down in abject, cringing terror.

The assistant, not knowing what else to do, held out his hand:

“Good-day!”

With a long-drawn, timid moan, she crept to the door. But once she was outside, her lamentations burst their bounds and rose in a howl of anguish.

In every hospital, there are several

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

smaller rooms, equipped with a few beds, set aside for the moribund. The hospital authorities prefer to separate the dying from the other patients. Into such a room, the attendants carried Herr Fiala. There were four beds at the disposal of those upon whom death had set its seal. One of these was empty. In the second, hardly to be distinguished from the pillow, lay a younger man, apparently unconscious. But in the next bed, immediately beside the new arrival, lay—it was God's will!—Herr Schlesinger. The insurance agent had been right: "Jews smoke too much!" Still, we must not blame smoking alone for his weakened, failing heart, his disintegrating muscles and tissues, his deteriorated vascular system. He had had a premonition of the end when his left arm became more and more stiff and painful. Prior even to that, the stairs were to blame, the hundreds of stairs leading to his "clients." God knows how many men, under such circumstances,

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

would have died at fifty! Perhaps, also, the fault lay in his eager restlessness, his anxiety, his continual, agonized desire to keep moving, even if the change merely involved shifting from one foot to the other. The devil only knows what is responsible for a man's taking off!

Neither Herr Fiala nor Herr Schlesinger was surprised at encountering the other here. They hardly greeted one another. So they lay, side by side—the insurer and the insured. And somewhat to one side lay the third patient. All three felt as if they were rushing furiously along in a boat or automobile, and they relinquished themselves breathlessly to the journey.

But when a healthy person enters the room, sees the three withered yellow faces, and hears the three-fold laboured breathing, he has a sudden conviction that these men are nearing some goal. Their breath is like a thread, like thick, heavy thread;

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

the needle penetrates the stiff material, and draws the thread after it; the material seems to rattle and gasp. Thus, they approach their death. And this death is a shirt or shroud, woven out of the coarsest, commonest stuff of invisibility. Hour after hour, they sew—steadily, never tiring.

Only Schlesinger interrupted his labour, now and then. In addition to the “*Neue Freie Presse*,” which he received daily, three books lay on his bed-table. Two of these were spicy novels, drawn from a renting library; the third was a large, gilt-edged edition of Heine’s poems, with illustrations which used to be in great favour, many years ago. This volume was Schlesinger’s only link with his own youth. It had once, together with the prayerbooks, formed the family library.

Occasionally, he picked up the newspaper or fingered the books, but he could not read, and so he put everything back,

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

except that he let the heavy book of poems lie on the coverlet a little longer than the others.

Suddenly the door opened and, accompanied by an enormous attendant, a tiny woman, who must have been inconceivably old, appeared on the threshold. She was so small that the ragged velvet pompadour bag trailing from her hand almost touched the ground. Schlesinger made a slight movement. He had recognized his mother. Carefully, the attendant led the dwarf-like old woman to the bed and offered her a chair. Some minutes passed; not a word was spoken. At last, a thin, almost childish voice said, with singing cadence:

“My child! I can’t see how you look!”

Again there was an endless pause before the son uttered his greeting.

“Well, what’s new, mama?”

“What should be new?”

And with this interrogative response, the singing voice answered all the questions

THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH  
in the world that begin with the words:  
“What’s new?”

Frau Schlesinger fumbled agitatedly  
with the strings of her bag.

“Do you eat well, my child?”

At last the bag was opened, and the  
feeble hands, covered with black half-  
gloves made of thread, took out a small  
package.

“You used to like little cakes. I brought  
some little cakes with me.”

No answer from her son. A long, silent  
interval.

“My child, you should eat. Eat, my  
child.”

From the bed came a wailing sound:

“But how can I eat, mother?”

“You should eat; eating is good for  
you.”

The child’s voice echoed for a moment.  
Then the silence fell again, and nothing  
was heard but the dying man’s breath,  
labouring busily. Suddenly, Schlesinger

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

grasped the volume of poems and placed it in his mother's hand:

"Mama! Do you see? It's from Kralowitz!"

And now an indescribable, an uncanny thing took place. The old woman, after fingering the book on all sides, began to read to herself in an incomprehensible voice, then suddenly slid from her chair and, looking more pitiful and deformed and even smaller than she had looked when seated, recited, in her child's voice, with the intonation of a school-girl:

"Ich bin die Prinzessin Ilse  
Und wohne am Ilsenstein,  
Komm mit mir mein Geliebter,  
Und lass uns glücklich."

Her surroundings, sickness, death—she no longer saw any of them. Excited by the sing-song rhythm, the mother's eyes shone proudly. But this was not the end. From the third bed, where the stranger

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

was industriously breathing, came a sharp, neighing, hysterical laugh, a laugh of diabolical amusement, that changed to a loud, wheezing sound and ended in a cry of pain. The old woman thought that the laugh signified a request for another verse; but nothing came to her mind except some lines of Bohemian child's doggerel, which she now recited, with great seriousness:

“Houpaj, Cistaj, Kralowitz,  
Unser Burscherl is nix nütz!”

She sat down, and the endless silence fell once more. It seemed now as if Schlesinger's mother were participating in the dying men's laborious breathing. When the big attendant came to take her away, it was already quite dark. But now she said:

“My child! I can see that you look very ill!”

The apparition had vanished. Once more,



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

the feverish patients imagined that a relentless machine was rushing them, with lightning speed, over thundering streets and bridges. Stitch after stitch, breath after breath, they continued to sew at the shroud of their invisible death.

Twilight still lingered in the room as a voice again broke the silence, interrupting the swift journey and the labour of breathing. This time, it was Fiala's voice; it did not sound at all feverish or parched, but clear and quite sensible. The voice addressed Herr Schlesinger, and it had to repeat its summons several times before the insurance agent roused himself and turned a distorted caricature of a face in Fiala's direction. It was an inopportune time to recall him from the abyss where he was seeking, not an old woman, feeble-minded from having given birth to nine children, but—his mother. This was, however, a matter of complete indifference to his countryman and death-bed companion.

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Without once looking at him, Fiala formulated his question, austere and with careful deliberation, as if it were an official statement. On his bed lay no book of poems, but a desk calendar.

“And if death occurs before the completion of the sixty-fifth year, then what does the family receive?”

These words were actually the fruit of much juristic reflection, and had been refined to the above succinctness during many long days of fever and agony. But Herr Schlesinger, upon hearing them, was gripped by a Berserker rage that he had never known when in good health. What weakness had hitherto prevented him from doing, he now did; he started up in bed, threw off the covers, rose to his knees. His eyes bulged, and he gnashed his teeth with hatred. For it was not Herr Fiala that lay next to him—there lay a weakling, a weakling like himself; there lay his own botched life; there lay his failure; there lay the

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

miserable, stifling dwelling from which he had never escaped; there lay want, subjection, stupidity, continual suffocation, day after day! And, intoxicated with hate, no longer knowing what he said, in an insane longing for revenge, he screamed:

“Complete it . . . complete it . . . do, by all means, complete your sixty-fifth year! For if you don’t, do you know what you’ll get? You’ll get dirt—dirt, dirt, dirt! Even if you pray to Rothschild and to God—dirt is what you’ll get!”

Then Schlesinger threw himself back on the bed and began to weep softly and to beg for help. The attendant came over, followed by the doctor. A hypodermic injection put an end to the fit of sobbing; and, an hour later, he was sewing again, this time with quick, hurried stitches, at his invisible shroud.

But Fiala was not sewing. His calendar still lay upon his knees. His old man’s face, horribly lined and drawn with fever

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

and approaching dissolution, stared raptly at the electric bulbs overhead. Between his brows, a single, deep fold appeared to have become intensified, the dark token of an extreme resolve which no one had ever observed when Fiala was in good health.

## VI

THE miracle began to reveal itself after the death sacrament had already been administered. Fiala had received this in a state of complete consciousness, but with calm detachment, as if it were merely a medicine, although a divine one. The same night, he seemed to relapse into a death struggle, and the doctor on duty gave orders that he should be allowed to die quietly. The decease would probably occur about noon of the next day. All this happened in the course of the second week in December. They left him unshaven and, at the morning inspection, the professor did not deign even to glance at the dying man.

Finally, after the noon meal, the attendant entered the room, in order to find out whether he should call the assistant

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

physician and have the death duly attested. He did not fancy annoyances of this kind, and was resolved to get rid of the body as quickly as possible, in accordance with the regulations.

As a matter of fact, ten minutes later, he actually did enter the assistant's office, but to announce that the patient was not only not dead, but was sitting up in bed, all by himself, making a distinct and audible demand for milk. At this display of obstinacy, the doctor became deeply indignant. Naturally, one's judgments of time were often bound to go astray. But such unpunctuality on Nature's part was in no way calculated to create good feeling. The assistant felt like a high official who, in consequence of a purely formal blunder, has laid himself open to accusation by some political faction, and who must now assume an easy, off-hand attitude, in order to conceal his embarrassment. It seemed to him that, not only the profession of medicine,

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

but authority itself had been rendered absolutely ridiculous. Of course, he did not find the dying man actually sitting up in bed—the attendant must have dreamed that—but it could not be denied that a voice was distinctly requesting milk. The assistant immediately accommodated himself to the new turn of events. To be sure, it was an infrequent case when such an old man, so close to the portals of Hades, should desire to return—but after all, this *was* a special case, a singular case, for which wounded authority might be considered quite irresponsible. The doctor—it might be remarked, in passing, that he stood on the threshold of a great career and was expecting his docentship within a year—the doctor distributed on all sides gruff words of vigorous encouragement and exhortation, words that he ordinarily employed only with his private patients. He insisted that Fiala's respiration, cardiac activity, and bodily energy, even if

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

pushed to the very limit of endurance, were nevertheless existent and operative, and that, over and above this, he manifested a marked pupillary reaction; he could talk, and consequently, one could not assert his sensory system to be affected. A pleasant curiosity was aroused in the future docent, a desire for scientific experimentation. Hurriedly, almost passionately, he made written notes of all kinds of methods of stimulating the body, whipping it up, calling out fresh reserves of energy; and while he was engaged in this task, his head was swarming with original notions related to future publication. The assistant was young, and, in his present mood, literary and practical ambitions seemed of equal weight and importance.

During the week following, it really did seem as if the life of the doomed man could be prolonged, by judicious injections and the application of methods of artificial invigoration and nourishment; and as the



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

pain symptoms tended to die out, it even looked as if he might be saved. This illusion was dispelled when, a few days before Christmas, general sepsis set in: blood poisoning and breaking-down of the cardiac region.

And now Fiala's organism assumed the proportions of a veritable "case"; it almost became a sensation. For he continued to refuse to die.

Medical interest mounted from day to day; every morning, special bulletins were posted in the corridors, as if it were not Herr Fiala, but some great hero who was struggling against death. The slightest details were listened to and exchanged with the utmost interest.

It appeared that the patient, in his moments of greatest agony, resisted the effects of morphine. In his intervals of semi-consciousness, he always strove to get out of bed; one got the impression that he was seeking something. He never refused nour-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

ishment, despite the fact that his digestive system was simply one great ulcer, a mere mass of active feculent matter. To these actual facts were naturally added legends, which were received with special eagerness by the corps of attendants. They endowed the poor wretch with herculean strength. The clutch of his skeleton-like hand had almost dislocated the wrist of one of the nurses. She herself could confirm the report at any time.

Herr Wotawa, who had had so many years of experience with sick people, was reduced to shaking his head in continual amazement:

“Just think of it! A fugitive from rolling-pins! Always frightened to death of his women. And he refuses to die!”

In the meanwhile, the feverish, decaying body lay there, all unconscious of its fame, a museum-piece depicting man's struggle with death. The more sympathetic would

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

gladly have helped him to a final rest. But even in his moments of unconsciousness, he fought wildly when he detected the presence of the morphine needle.

In the morning, the room containing the museum-piece could not be kept clear of visitors. Sensation-seekers, hospital internes, physicians came and went. Professors even conducted their students there, seeking a definition of this uncanny death-process. Even the psychiatrists did not neglect to glance at Fiala. They wished to discover if his ravings would not bring to light something of value from the darkest abyss of the soul thus laggard in perishing. It was almost like examining death under the enlarging glass of time.

An old Scandinavian named Cornelius Caldevin was then teaching at the University. He was a heart-specialist, very popular and greatly sought after. He communicated an inexplicable courage to his

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

patients, quite regardless of whether their condition were good or bad. This power of instilling fortitude might well have been evidence of a spiritual gift in Caldevin. As a matter of fact, he had been a theological student who had transferred to medicine, and his thwarted theological bent broke out in his old age. His colleagues ridiculed the suave unction and the sanctimonious generalizations with which his lectures were filled. But he was an expert diagnostician, a shining light in his profession, a successful researcher, a doctor of the widest experience, and, accordingly, his "unscientific" parenthetical remarks were indulgently overlooked.

Caldevin, too, with a few students, came to visit Fiala's bedside. And there was a sublime beauty in the gesture with which the old doctor placed his hand on the sufferer's forehead. He did not remove it until the time came for him to depart. He spoke slowly, almost in a whisper, whereas it was

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

the usual custom to speak loudly in this room, since no one believed that the patient could hear anything.

These were Caldevin's words, as far as they were comprehensible; for not only did he whisper them, but in addition, he had an indistinct and hesitating delivery:

"Now, gentlemen . . . just look . . . examine this heart!"

And he listened to the pulse:

"Very good; it is still working . . . something is still beating . . . my friends . . . the heart of mankind . . . that is, not merely . . . what shall I say? . . . the anatomical heart . . . the functional organ . . . the machine, as we have learned to know it . . . life mechanically motivated, independent of the will . . . and so forth . . . gentlemen . . . there is something within us . . . something that is king over the heart."

"The king of hearts."

The vulgar voice of one of the students

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

had uttered the witticism. Completely intimidated, the old gentleman suddenly stopped. Besides, he had encountered the glance of that over-zealous assistant. It confused him, and he could not utter another word.

But the assistant, filled with inexplicable wrath, hissed between his teeth:

“Blockhead!”

At the same time, two young men emerged from the gateway into the Alserstrasse: one of them was Dr. Burgstaller, who had admitted Fiala on All Souls' Day; the other was a colleague who had graduated with him, Dr. Kapper by name. They decided to walk over to the café which they regularly frequented. Kapper did not swallow a drop of the milk he had ordered.

“A disgusting affair, the business of that fellow who will not die!”

Burgstaller agreed with his colleague.

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Other men, as well as Fiala, didn't have to die just because the faculty ordered them to do so!

Kapper felt that he had not been understood:

"Listen to me! I mean something quite different. One of these days, just observe the death of a genuine proletarian. It is an elevating spectacle. They're without fear; they make no demands. They've surrendered—they're calm, satisfied. All proletarians die in the same way. It's only the bourgeois philistines who die differently. Even the most obscure ones. Every philistine has his own method of refusing to die. That's because he fears to lose something else along with his life. A bank-account, a filthy bank-book, a respected name, an old, tumble-down sofa. To put it in a phrase: a respectable citizen is one who possesses a secret . . ."

Surprised and triumphant, Kapper gazed before him. He had hit upon a

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

gnomic, but striking phrase. Burgstaller emptied his second cognac before admonishing his friend:

“Look out, Kapper! You’re getting into dangerous political waters. Why should we start a fight at eleven o’clock in the morning?”

“That’s not political at all.”

“Then it’s literary! And that’s something I don’t in the least understand.”

In explanation, we should add that young Dr. Kapper had already published several of his articles in the radical artistic magazines. Very elaborate productions, brilliantly written. Burgstaller looked at him good-humouredly, and resumed the conversation:

“My dear fellow, as long as you’re talking about the ethics of dying, let me mention that, up to the present, I’ve learned, at any event, that there’s only one race of mankind that dies unwillingly. Do you



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

want to know who they are? You Jews!"

Kapper gazed down at his milk. He did not feel in the mood to discuss this theme. Besides, what did Burgstaller know about it? Not that he, Kapper, wished to evade the issue. That was not his way. He had always signed all his articles with his true given name, "Jonas," when it would have been easy enough to alter it slightly to "Joseph." Accordingly, he passed unconcernedly over Burgstaller's attack and started to talk about the subject to which he had been drawn at first:

"Yesterday, I myself went over for ten minutes to take a look at this fellow Fiala. It was interesting to observe the case. A little philistine—nothing but a dirty little philistine! But his head was wonderful. I thought of Michelangelo, and of the fact that the meanest little philistines, placed in such circumstances, become good plastic subjects. Well, he began to talk—uncon-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

scious, of course—and the things he said! Upon my word of honour, I was astounded!”

Burgstaller emptied his third cognac.

“‘It is completed!’ I won’t swear that it wasn’t ‘completed’ or ‘completion,’ or ‘after completion.’ Can you imagine it? A hundred times, I heard him rattle: ‘completed!’ ”

Burgstaller struck the table violently with the flat of his hand:

“Keep quiet, you old woman! Let me alone, with your nurses’ gossip and attendants’ fairy tales! I want some peace! I don’t want to hear another word today about that awful clinic. You’d do better to take a look outside!”

The street was swarming with life. There was no snow, no dirt to hinder the traffic. And life seemed to have assumed the form of hundreds upon hundreds of feminine legs, bare to the knee. His lips quivering, Burgstaller followed the voluptuous

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

rhythm. He did not avert his head from the spectacle as he said:

“What are you doing this evening?”

“I? This evening? Why?”

Burgstaller kept on peering through the window.

“Man alive! Are you crazy? It’s New Year’s Eve. Hail!—victory and revenge! I’m not the holiday goat tomorrow. Kapper! Listen—come along with me tonight, won’t you?”

But Dr. Kapper cast down his eyes, with a sort of arrogant melancholy:

“I can’t go. I must work.”

Frau Fiala was glad, these days, to avoid the solitude of her kitchen. She visited the neighbours, sat round with the janitress, stood talking with the grocery woman, and the more sympathy she received, the harder she wept. She told everybody about the frightful experiences she had, day and night. Once, wild-eyed,

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

she had gazed at *his* hat. On another occasion, *his* coat was hanging there, quiet and empty—suddenly, the mutely reproachful garment had transformed itself—and she had fallen into a swoon. Also, he had already “appeared” to her. . . .

It is apparent that, while the strange, protracted death-struggle surged to and fro, Frau Fiala believed that her husband had already departed this life. On the other hand, at certain times she would transfix her neighbours with scorn, and cry out in a heat of temper that her husband would get well very quickly and easily, and thus play a trick on the whole wicked world. But whatever her mood happened to be, she wept, wept with mechanical regularity.

Her visits to the hospital, however, became less and less regular, and, as time passed, more and more infrequent. She could be of no assistance whatever; it was a long trip; she was old; the trolley-ride was expensive; it was foolish to take food

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

along, and, above all things, his appearance frightened her so terribly that she herself became ill with grief every time she saw him.

Thus, of the three members of the family, Franzl was the only one left, and he stayed at the hospital day and night. At first, they wanted to send him away, but he understood how to make himself so useful that the attendants, during inspection, took him under their special protection.

It was fortunate that Fiala's salary continued, and that the firm had, of its own volition, sent the family a special compensation of three million marks.\* In conversation, the old woman was already expending a portion of this sum for the funeral ceremonies. For it was clear that a beautiful third-class funeral was due of right to her poor husband; and that, despite the hard times, it must be made a distinguished occasion.

\* At this time, of course, not a very large sum—Tr.

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Unfortunately, Frau Fiala's intellect was as near-sighted as her eyes were far-sighted and unsuited to reading. Living alone with Klara, and no longer having need to defend her, a nameless fear arose in her, and with it, an impotent rage: for she felt now that she was eternally delivered up, without protection, to her evil sister.

Up to this time, she had not initiated Klara into the mystery. But the typed letters were so hard to decipher, the phraseology of the "Tutelia" policy so full of complicated clauses. Hour after hour, she sat in the kitchen, spelling out the words. But no matter how she settled her spectacles and wiped them on her apron, the writing continued its meaningless swirl before her eyes. Klara was younger; her eyesight was better, and she had a better head. "Klara, the clever one, she always used to learn things well and to count well, too." But in this very cleverness lay the danger. For a time, Frau Fiala kept up the strug-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

gle for independence. But every day, Klara's superior power grew more difficult to resist, as she came home, threw her booty into the corner, dashed round the kitchen like a madwoman, peering insanely into the pots and establishing the fact that the usual theft and burglarious entry had not taken place, and finally bore the whole noisy riot with her into the corridor.

One evening, Frau Fiala felt that she could not endure the secrecy and uncertainty any longer, and so she showed the policy to her sister. Klara stood before the door and held the paper under the hall-light. The knot of her dirty head-kerchief had worked round almost to her ear; she blinked, blew her nose, and her open mouth revealed a greedy, covetous tongue. She read the document twice, three times; and then thrust it in her pocket, with the words:

"I'm going right off to my doctor with it!"

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Frau Fiala became suspicious:

“What are you going to do, Klarinka?”

But Klarinka burst into a laugh, pretended to be insulted, and acted as if she were about to throw the paper in her sister’s face:

“Here! Do you think I want your filthy paper! You won’t get a thing from it!”

Marie Fiala’s voice began to tremble in supplication:

“What’s that you’re saying? Why won’t I get anything?”

But Klara could not conceal her spiteful triumph:

“Because that’s what it says! If Karl dies before the fifth of January, you get nothing. . . .”

Klara looked mortally insulted as she put the contract back in her pocket:

“It’s only because I’m so decent and so good that I am going over to my doctor!”



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Frau Fiala returned to the kitchen. She sat down on the chest where Franzl always used to sit and tried to lay hold of an idea, *the* idea. After about half an hour, it began to dawn in the dimness of her brain. A shock of terror ran through her body like a current of electricity, with such force that she seemed to taste metal on her tongue. It was the first and only time in her life that she had felt in terror of God. A monstrous, an unimaginable thing was taking place! Her husband, who had long been dead—did not die! It was because of the insurance that he forced himself to live. For her sake—who had long ago given him up and put him out from among the living! She staggered to her feet, uttering short, crazy shrieks, and, just as she was, without shawl or coat, she ran out into the winter weather. The janitress and the grocery woman stared after her receding form.

## VII

BUT Fiala stands firm and rigid at the portal, at his portal, beneath the Imperial arms. He is standing there for himself alone. The gate is wide and high, but his figure fills it. His great fur coat wraps him in warmth. His three-cornered hat touches the arch. The staff in his hand wields a mighty power. Here he must wait. He no longer knows who has given him that order. But orders are orders. What is not yet finished, must be completed. It is glorious to stand under orders. It is glorious to have a duty. A man gets old, in the kitchen with the women. Fiala is not old; Fiala is not weary. Fiala is as fresh and strong as a young bear. At five o'clock, he will be relieved. As soon as the clock strikes, his relief will come. The clock in the church-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

tower flames out, and the black and red numbers that mark the hours spring forward, as they do in a game of lotto. Quickly, one after another, impatiently, they spring out: Twelve and Seventeen, Eight, and One Hundred, and Twenty-six. The clock strikes thousands of hours, but it does not strike the hour of five. Fiala is filled with exaltation; he understands his duty: he must stand on guard, and not permit himself to be led astray! By no one! He must stand on guard, allow no one to enter! That is the order! Heaven only knows what they are discussing, up there in the conference room. He has already let out the head official. Here comes Herr Pech!

“One side, Fiala!” . . . “This is my place!” . . . “But I must get into the building.” . . . “Have you a permit?” . . . “But I am a member of the staff!” . . . “That doesn’t concern me at all. Orders are orders!” . . .

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

And Pech comes again and again, sometimes alone, sometimes with a little boy, whom he tries to smuggle through the gate. But Fiala is on the alert. Pech takes a gulden from his pocket, a round, silver gulden. Fiala will not listen to a bribe. All he wishes is what is his, his due—and no more! The hours spring out of the clock, black and red. Like divers, they appear on the springboard and throw themselves into the river. And the street swarms with life, the life which he has known from the beginning. The passing school-children raise their eyes timidly, gazing up at his mighty authority. But he does not move a muscle. Their silly faces are not for him to notice. They wish to attract his attention. They make a great clatter with their skates. They bounce little balls on the ground. Let them! He pays no attention to the young girls who walk by, intimately, whispering to him. He knows those tricks. They do not tempt or embarrass him in the least. Every-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

thing in its own time! Only, it will be hard, very hard, when the regiment passes by: the Eleventh Imperial and Royal Infantry, gray uniform! "*Battalion ha-a-lt!*" Magnificent in his saddle, Major Swoboda himself holds aloft his drawn sword, in token of command. He is wearing a fir-twigg in his cap. The double rows of soldiers are all proudly wearing their fir-twigs. The cry rings out down the street: "File-leader Fiala!" But Fiala does not call out: "Here!" He knows that he must not announce himself. Again and again the call echoes: "File-leader Fiala!" The regimental band falls in. They play the march of the Habsburgs; they play: "O du mein Österreich." Fiala recognises the mule drawing the bass drum. The music swings into rhythm. The players toss and brandish their instruments, keeping time. And the company-files, brilliant in the sunlight, swing and sway along in march-step. With a crash of cymbals, they go by on their

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

way to rifle-practice, to military manoeuvres, perhaps only to a holiday festivity. He has easily recognised his friends. But this time, he can indulge in no gay moments with them: he cannot play cards, or go to a dance, or spend the night carousing and drinking beer. He must keep on standing at his gate. Already they are far away. Only the increasing tempo of the clashing cymbals remains! It beats in his body, in his blood.

But often again it is night. Again and again—night. And then, the red and black hours no longer jerk convulsively out of the church-tower clock. The church-tower is no longer to be seen. But before every gate, along the entire street, are rows of ash-cans. Ashes are strewn about everywhere. Fiala is on guard. The order weighs heavily upon his heart; it is agony. He stands there, in his thick fur coat, as if he were being held erect in a barrel without a bottom. The old trimmings are dull

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

and tarnished. Hat, fur coat, all his garments cover him and enclose him tightly, like a great grief. Franzl comes along, trailing a market-bag. Franzl is a little, hollow-cheeked child, a cripple. He is Franzl's father. Therefore, he must do a frightful thing for the sake of the poor cripple. Each time, he must gulp down the tea which the boy brings with him in the black market-bag. But it is not hot tea; it is boiling, seething tea; no, it is bluish fire, unsweetened fire that he drinks down, not in one gulp, but swallow after swallow. The spirit-flames begin to lick and eat away the inner walls of his body. But the outer walls, the skin, remain ice-cold. If he could only close his eyes now, he would lose sight of everything, forget everything. But he must keep on the alert until he is relieved. Did he not stand guard often enough with the Eleventh Regiment? His relief approaches. And now he feels as if a punishment were menacing him, because

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

of his bad service, his ill life. He must atone for his errors, committed while on guard. Who has given the order? But thinking also is forbidden him. He who thinks will fall asleep. Pech is at his side again: "I don't understand you, Fiala. Just stretch yourself out a bit! Everything will be all right in a minute. It's so easy!" But it is not at all easy, for him. He must not countenance any such instigations to rebellion, any such outbursts of disorderliness. Better to look out upon the ash-gray street. Depression wanders there. He sees Deacon Kabrhel, the priest of his native town. He is fat, and he limps. As in the holy procession, Kabrhel is bearing the Body of the Lord, in its radiant silver coffer. Two chaplains walk beside him. But he is preceded by the teacher, Subak, who holds aloft the banner. Behind them are a few pious souls, in peasant costume. Fiala is glad to turn his head away. The sight of these figures, with their tremendous hats



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

and silver buttons, makes him afraid. He feels that these old peasants stand in a paternal, threatening relationship to him and to his punishment. But in the procession there are likewise some sacred animals. Fiala can clearly recognise the black oxen and the cows of the superintendent. Now the deacon turns toward the gate: "Kneel!" he commands. And the procession kneels in the public street, and the oxen and cows kneel likewise, devoutly. Then the Reverend Kabrhel raises the Sacred Host towards the disobedient candidate for confirmation. His voice trembles: "Kneel, all of you!" But Fiala, although he would like to do so, may not kneel! He knows that what is not completed, must be completed. Oh, what a great sin he has committed, in not kneeling with the others. For this, too, he will be punished by the insolent animals. The worst among them are the geese, who suddenly waddle up from the village pond by hundreds, clutter about his feet,

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

and gabble angrily. He knows how dangerous these exasperated beasts are. Perhaps he would run away, if he could only move his legs. The street begins to murmur, and it turns into the little brook of his native town. He distinctly recognizes the bushes, the fishing-holes, the swimming-holes, the places where the crayfish were found. But why is the opposite bank so far away? He is not startled at the sight. Is the Donau any smaller at Praterspitz? It is lovely to see its little wavelets creeping up to his gate. But the stream bodes him no good. The fish-plague has broken out. Thousands of pike, carp, and even larger fish are floating on the water, their scaleless, hideous bellies upturned. The smell of carrion pervades the whole world, rising to the very clouds. Then he who is so sorely tried, begins to pray to God:

“Dear God! I stand here, because it is so ordered. I do not stand here because I wish anything for myself, because I desire a re-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

ward. From childhood on, I have wanted a little house. (There must be sunflowers in the garden.) But Thou wilt not grant me this house. Never shall I have that joy. Alas, why must I bear so much, I, Fiala, and no other?"

Fiala has long known that heartfelt prayers, uttered at the right moment, always help. He has done well to pray. For now the mist is falling. The good, autumn mist is lying over the naked, warm fields, so thick that one cannot see the potato-fires, but one can only smell them. And the good mist also drifts within the gate of destiny. And that comforts the gate-keeper's soul, for he cannot see anything on any side of him. Alone and gigantic, he must now stand, waiting, in the centre of God's invisible world. His staff with the ball at the top supports him; his stiff fur coat holds him upright. Nothing more can happen. If he knew a song, an old Bohemian song, he would sing it, for it is pleasant

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

and cheerful to stand amid fog and the steam rising from the earth; it is sweet to lie in space, infinite, timeless. . . . To close one's eyes . . .

But it is not so commanded. Some one is calling him. "Fiala!" He imagines that is what he hears, but loudly and shrilling comes the cry: "Tutelia!" He is penetrated with the fear that grips the criminal caught in the act! "At your service!" With a heroic effort, he opens his eyes. The church-tower clock is gone. The circular hole allows a disk of red sky to be seen. Trumpet-notes from all sides. The manoeuvres cease with the last notes of the tattoo. A wild tumult of trampling feet approaches. He recognises the gay and majestic tramping, the joyous parade coming, with gay abandon, from Schönbrunn down through the Mariahilferstrasse. First, the mounted police; then, the body-guard, in whose midst, drawn by white horses, is the Imperial carriage, with its

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

golden wheels and lamps. The national anthem resounds through the air alive with the rustling and fluttering of flags. A green plume waves from afar, nodding cheerfully. Fiala knows that the relief-guard is coming, thundering nearer and nearer. Now he must pull himself together, step forward just at the right moment, and call out to the first among his superiors:

“I beg to report—death follows!”

He will be shown to his place in the golden procession flying through the streets.

It is high time. The mist has become transformed. It dominates the entrance hall in the form of a thick smoke, shot with fiery flames. But who bars the way now? The street must be kept clear! We cannot have any knots of people here. There must be a clear path between himself and the splendid, glorious being approaching him. But the crowd continues to whirl about him. It wants to push him, so recently re-

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

leased, back into the choking smoke of the gate, where he no longer belongs. And now he sees the crowd. His whole life boils up in rage and despair. A hundred Maries, five hundred Klaras are crushing him, pressing him back into his prison, where he has waited and whence he has at length emerged the victor. All the Maries are weeping and carrying wreaths. All the Klaras are beating at his head with their evil brooms. They try stealthily to bind his hands with pre-war thread. They, the witches, are responsible. They have always locked him up. Now, when the relief is approaching with a sound of thunder, even now, they would bar his path, whining and cursing. But, God be thanked! his arm has regained its strength; the ball on his staff glitters . . .

Sunk forward in her chair, Frau Fiala stares at the horror of the death that will not come. During the last few days,

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

with the approach of evening, the screaming woman has had to be dragged out of the room by main force. Fiala is no longer a "case." This sensation, too, is exhausted. One cardiac muscle is stronger, another weaker; men built like horses are infrequent, but they have long since ceased to be miraculous. Without moving, the old woman stares at the heap of putrefaction under the coverlet, breathing in heavy, laboured gasps, lying in its own excretions, since no one comes to clean it. But on the pillow rests the yellow head, the gigantic forehead of a church father. The woman no longer recognises this strange head. From time to time, the sufferer strains his body, endeavouring to make some movement. The hands attempt to reach under the pillow, and the legs stir under the blanket.

Klara has entered, and starts to deliver a lecture to her sister, who seems to have turned to stone. She must come home at

## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

once; it is useless to sit and look! Every few minutes, Franzl appears in the door. His eyes stare straight ahead of him, as if it were a struggle for him to look at his father. Suddenly, in the midst of her harangue, Klara raises her voice shrilly, in her usual manner. Then it seems as if the creature that bears the name of Fiala were awakening. His open eyes gaze fixedly at the women. They are no longer the eyes of a stranger. The body hoists itself up in bed, and quickly, with a jerk of utterly impossible energy, two gray, hairy sticks emerge from beneath the coverlet and make heroic efforts to connect with the floor. And now, uttering a hollow shout of victory, a wild giant stands erect, raising a thread-like arm aloft, as if to strike a blow. It succeeds in making a single, heavy step; then the body collapses, a heap of bones.

Here ends the story of the death of Karl



## THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH

Fiala, humble citizen. Like a good runner, he had exceeded his goal by two days, since they recorded the death as having occurred on the seventh of January. Without delay, the attendants, after a hasty inspection, took the body to the spot where it belonged, like a heap of rubbish that has been laying too long in the street.

Once the strange face was removed from the widow's sight, she could, luckily, begin to cry again. The death-bed was now empty. Klara, who had so often noticed how the sufferer's hand would seek something under the pillow, and who, unless she were dreaming, had once seen there the gleam of a gold coin, now approached the bedside, as if casually, snuffing up her tears.

Moaning loudly, her fingers trembling with pain, she began to stroke the desolated pillow. Suddenly, she felt her exploring wrists enclosed in a grasp of iron. She

THE MAN WHO CONQUERED DEATH  
screeched: "You damned rascal! I am not  
taking anything from you! Marinka!  
Look!"

Franzl raised the pillow in silence and  
thrust two worthless objects into his  
pocket. One was a blank calendar pad; the  
other, a dirty piece of lace trimming from  
some old, forgotten uniform.







# MILLS COLLEGE LIBRARY

THIS BOOK DUE ON THE LAST DATE  
STAMPED BELOW

Books not returned on time are subject to a fine  
of 10c per volume per day.

NOV 4

(FACULTY)

My 8 '38

Oct 15 '38

FACULTY

Ja 18 '38

Ap 6 - '38

My 22 '40

Ja 28 '44

FACULTY

FACULTY

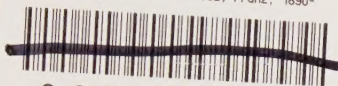
JAN 13 '65

DEC 12 '65

APR 29 1996

MILLS COLLEGE LIBRARY

BF The man who conquered death,  
Fiction W488m Werfel, Franz, 1890-



3 3086 00246 2976

Mills College Library  
Withdrawn

51051

W488m

